BALLARAT

Panamint Valley Ghost Town

Compiled By

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HISTORICAL LANDMARK
DEDICATION PROGRAM
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1963

WATERHOLE — POST OFFICE SPRING — BALLARAT

The Adobe ruins of Old Ballarat, Ghost Town of the Panamints, are on the alluvial fan of Pleasant Canyon. A quarter of a mile to the south, along the western slope of the Panamints, is a still older point of historic interest, Post Office Spring.

Each in its own day and in its own way was an oasis for thirsty miners, stage drivers, freighters and their animals. Each was identified with a separate revival of California mining in the half century following the Gold Rush of 1849.

Let us peer a bit into those periods when Panamint Valley was alive and making California history.

Post Office Spring had its role in the early 1870s while the Silver Stampede was on at Panamint City up Surprise Canyon. It gained stature, emerging from a common, desert water hole into a communications exchange. Outlaws hidden away in Panamint's canyons direly needed supplies.

They effected an understanding with certain drivers on Caesar Myerstein's Panamint Stage Line whereby their outgoing cash and letters could be picked up. In return, the incoming supplies could be left at the spring. A box wired in the crotch of a mesquite tree served as a receptacle for mail. Supplies left near the box could be safely replevined without fear of ambush. The spring was out in the open.

For twenty years after the rise and fall of Panamint City, the search for gold and silver lagged. This lull, however, came to an end in the early 1890s. The Panamint Range, together with its neighboring mountains, were again combed by prospectors. It was in this era that Ballarat was born.

Renewal of interest in mining seems to be keyed to hard times. The financial distress which the nation experienced during 1893-97 brought hordes of prospectors into the Mojave Desert.

Rich placer gold was found in the El Paso Mountains of Kern County in 1893, followed by the big lode gold strike at the Yellow Aster in the Rand District in 1895. Henry Ratcliff and others made rich gold discoveries high in Pleasant Canyon about the same time. Every canyon in the Panamints, the Argus and Slate ranges was alive with prospectors.

The O. B. Joyful in Tuber Canyon, the Gem in Jail Canyon, the Ratcliff and the World Beater high in Pleasant Canyon all became producers. Literally thousands of miners were busy in the Panamint Valley area. They needed a town for supplies, recreation and as a communication-transportation center. Ballarat was the answer.

Its site, at the mouth of Pleasant Canyon, was convenient for the Ratcliff Mine and its workers. Over 200 men were employed there at its peak. Nearby Post Office Spring assured potable water.

After Ratcliff's original discovery in Pleasant Canyon, others were developed in the same canyon and organized as Ratcliff Consolidated Gold Mines, Limited. They utilized the same milling facility, strategically located at a lower level. The added influx of miners and millmen for the Ratcliff operation emphasized the need for, and sparked the decision to establish a town.

One version of Ballarat's beginning is that of William Caruthers in his *Loafing Along Death Valley Trails,* "The future of Pleasant Canyon seemed assured. It was decided to move the two saloons and grocery to the flats below where a town would have room to grow. When the citizens met to choose a name, George Riggins, a young Australian, suggested the new town be given a name identified with gold the world over. Ballarat in his native country met the requirement and its name was adopted."

Following the discovery of the Ratcliff Mine, legally recorded July 6, 1896, a year passed before Ballarat was officially recognized. It is a matter of record that a Postmaster and a Justice of the Peace were appointed in 1897. The intervening year was needed to secure financing for a mill, build necessary housing and get the mine into production.

At any rate, on July 21, 1897, according to information from the Post Office Department, John S. Stotler was appointed the first Postmaster of Ballarat. Inyo County records show that Richard Decker was appointed Justice of the Peace in April 1897 and was subsequently elected to serve two terms.

Mary Bigelow of Bishop was secured as Ballarat's first and only school teacher in a one room school. With two saloons and a general store which carried mining supplies and with a population of possibly 200, Ballarat was ready to grow.

BALLARAT MEMORIES

From Rupert Greene, of Independence, who came to Ballarat in 1898 with his parents as a boy of six years, we capture a few of his youthful memories. He recalls Mrs. Bigelow as his teacher and the enrollment of not over a dozen pupils. Three of the twelve were Mrs. Bigelow's children, George, Kate and William. Only a few of the mining men or business people had families but there were enough children that a school was necessary.

The water source of Ballarat was the snow and rain from the Panamints, pure at its beginning, but more and more saline as it penetrated the lower depths of the Valley floor. Mr. Greene recalls that the better water was from the shallower wells. Most of the homes had their own wells, but there was a larger, deeper community well, constructed of concrete, which may still be seen in the center of the old town's ruins.

The most available building material was adobe. However, like all mining camps, tents and combinations of adobe, wood and metal were plentiful.

Visitors to old Ballarat will note that the broken, crumbling walls are mostly monolithic, not regulation adobe blocks. According to Mr. Greene, a mixture of adobe earth, cement and water was poured into wooden wall frames, possibly three feet high. The desert sun soon helped the mixture to set, the frames were raised and another layer was poured. These primitive structures called for water-tight roofs, for too much of the mix was soluble salt and silt.

Ballarat's boom came to its peak through its first five years, 1897-1902. At its height there were three hotels, a boarding house, two general stores, two feed yards, several blacksmiths, a prospector-doctor, an assayer, a carpenter, a butcher, seven saloons and no church.

William Bigelow of Big Pine, recalls the Calloways, James and his wife and her father, Sylvester Tappan, who operated a hotel, bar and corral. Their younger children, William, Lester and Belle, were his schoolmates. He vividly remembers the Porter brothers, Dell and Lee. They had a general store including groceries. Later, when Rhyolite had its day, they moved there.

Rupert Greene tells us of two very colorful saloon proprietors, active in 1898-99. These were "Whiskers" John Patterson Chambers and John Lambert. The former earned his nickname when the "Montana Kid", a newly arrived "bad" man, reached across the bar and whacked off a fistful of Chambers' whiskers with his knife.

He remembers Lambert, a former cowboy, who did his civic bit each Fourth of July in Ballarat by putting on a one man rodeo.

In 1901, the Teagle brothers, Ed and Charlie, added another commercial enterprise to the town, a general miner's supply and feed yard establishment. It was managed by a big Scotchman, John R. McCormack, who was later postmaster, 1903-5. The Teagles were prototypes of the chain stores. They had similar establishments in Johannesburg, Garden Station, at the Tanks and later at Skidoo.

The Ratcliff operation, with a large payroll and very satisfactory production throughout its early years, constituted the chief support of Ballarat. Its success naturally stimulated more prospecting and resulted in several smaller producers which added to Ballarat's economy. The Ratcliff 10-stamp mill was doubled to 20 stamps.

Ed Teagle declares that their store manager had 3000 different accounts on his books in the store's best year. Although the actual population never exceeded 250, Ballarat had a wide trade area radius. Burros with packs, occasionally buckboards and mules, provided transportation.

The Randsburg Railroad was completed in the late 90s. Johannesburg was Ballarat's railhead. Stages and freight teams again utilized the tortuous Slate Range Crossing. Stage fare from Johannesburg to Ballarat was $25 each way, recalls Ed Teagle. Mail and express contracts were made by the Postal authorities. A Mr. Cheeseborough is believed to have had the first contract and was succeeded by Otto F. Rinaldi and W. F. Clark. The route included stops at Garden Station, and Teagles Tanks, north of what is now Trona.

With a light team of four or six horses, it took six to eight days to make the round trip between Johannesburg and Ballarat, according to Frederick Clark, W. F. Clark's son.

HARRISBURG — SKIDOO

In 1905, the Ratcliff became idle. Its expansion in milling facilities, plus new and supposedly improved management, failed to bring increased production. Instead, it produced stockholder dissatisfaction and the mine suspended operations.

Ballarat's pace slackened but still continued strong. Other mines were producing and needed the essentials which Ballarat so well provided . . . groceries, mining supplies and "Oh! be Joyful" . . . with emphasis upon the latter.

July 4th, 1905, is a propitious date in Panamint Valley history. Ballarat was having a big celebration. Miners and prospectors from far and wide headed for it. Among them were Pete Augerreberry and Shorty Harris. They had teamed up at Furnace Creek Ranch, enjoying the hospitality of Ed Munsey who had succeeded Jimmie Dayton there.

"Pete and Shorty decided to pull out for the cooler altitudes of the Panamints. Shorty wanted to go to Ballarat for supplies and some convivial mingling with his kind upon the Fourth of July. Pete wanted to find a gold mine." So goes the story in C. B. Glasscock's *Here's Death Valley.*

"Driving their burros across Death Valley, climbing steep Blackwater Canyon, they came out upon the easier slopes at an altitude of five thousand feet. They expected to camp that night at Wildrose Spring, a favorite rendezvous of prospectors and a regular overnight stop on the trail from Furnace Creek to Ballarat."

Hurrying ahead, intent upon arriving in Ballarat for the celebration, Shorty ignored Pete's exclamation, "Wait a minute, Shorty, I got somep'n here." It was a rich specimen of free gold. Three days later, after the celebration, Shorty and Pete returned and made complete examination of the prospect.

They found it good, located claims, erected monuments and agreed to call the new camp, Harrisberry . . . an agreement soon forgotten by Shorty. It became Harrisburg, as it boomed, which provoked Pete.

It was following this discovery, that two well known Nevada mining men, Harry Ramsey and "One-Eye" Thompson, were on their way to investigate the Harrisburg strike. They became lost in a fog as they neared it. When the fog cleared, they made a find, located about six miles north of Harrisburg. It was richer than that of Pete and Shorty at Harrisburg. Skidoo was the result.

Program

DEDICATION

OF

BALLARAT MONUMENT

ERECTED BY

DEATH VALLEY '49ers INC.

IN COOPERATION WITH

EASTERN CALIFORNIA MUSEUM ASSOCIATION

2:00 P.M.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1963

OPENING CEREMONY.....RICHARD C. BAILEY
Co-Chairman, Historical Landmark Committee
Death Valley '49ers

GREETINGS.....RALPH A. FEAR
President, Death Valley '49ers

GREETINGS.....MARY DEDECKER
President, Eastern California Museum Association

GREETINGS.....ARDIS WALKER
Chairman, Historical Landmark Committee
Death Valley '49ers

MASTER OF CEREMONIES.....PAUL HUBBARD
Member, Historical Landmark Committee
Death Valley '49ers

BALLARAT

LOCATED THREE AND A HALF MILES EAST OF THIS POINT, BALLARAT WAS BORN IN 1897 FOLLOWING THE DISCOVERY OF THE RICH RATCLIFF MINE IN PLEASANT CANYON. ITS NAMESAKE WAS THE FAMOUS GOLD CITY IN AUSTRALIA. NEVER A LARGE TOWN, IT SERVED PANAMINT VALLEY AND WEST DEATH VALLEY COUNTRY AS A MINERS SUPPLY AND RECREATION CENTER. BALLARAT'S COLORFUL LIFE EBBED WITH THE CLOSING OF ITS POST OFFICE IN 1917.

HISTORICAL LANDMARK

PLACED BY
DEATH VALLEY '49ERS INC.
AND
EASTERN-CALIFORNIA
MUSEUM ASSOCIATION
NOVEMBER 11, 1963

THE BALLARAT STORY.....Doris Bray and George Pipkin
Introducing Ballarat Old Timers

GREETINGS FROM INYO COUNTY .....Maury Sorrells
Inyo County Supervisor

ADDRESS.....Senator William Symons, Jr.
State Senator for Inyo, Mono and Alpine Counties

PRESENTATION OF MONUMENT.....Henry Hellmers
Director, Death Valley '49ers

ACCEPTANCE AND UNVEILING—
Inyo County Representatives

Bob Montgomery, a well respected and well financed miner of Bullfrog, immediately became associated with the new find and a contemporary of Ballarat was born. Unsuccessful miners in the Panamints were drawn to the new strikes, the successful ones stayed, and Ballarat, weakened, carried on.

The advent of Skidoo was significant. It meant that the mail and express route from Johannesburg to Ballarat would be extended to include Skidoo. It also meant that Ballarat became a junction point with the Jo'burg-Skidoo stage-mail and express and the Darwin-Ballarat stage.

The early development of Harrisburg and Skidoo gave a shot in the arm to Ballarat's business as suppliers of the new camps. However, it was not long before Skidoo attained its place in the sun, becoming larger than Ballarat. More freighting, both from Johannesburg and Beatty, Nevada, was required.

Skidoo got its name from the fact that Bob Montgomery, who was really the father of Skidoo, dropped the remark that he planned to pipe water into the new camp from Telescope Peak, twenty-three miles away. In that period, *twenty-three* meant *skidoo*. Concensus of opinion was that the camp should be named Skidoo . . . so be it.

Twenty-three miles of steel pipe, more or less, meant a lot of freighting. It was done by teams of 16 or 18 mules from the Johannesburg railhead, across Panamint Valley and up through Wildrose Canyon, around what are now known as the Rattlesnake Curves, into Harrisburg Flats and then up the steep climb into north Skidoo.

A Mr. Coffee did that job, according to James Frank Chrysler, still living in Lone Pine. As a boy of seventeen he drove the stage line from Darwin during June, July and August 1907 to connect at Ballarat with the Cheeseborough mail and express stage from Johannesburg to Skidoo.

The old Twenty Mule Borax trail which skirted the Slate Range to the east via Granite Wells and Lone Willow Spring also had connection with Ballarat but it was longer. It is believed that the more direct Slate Range crossing was the preferred approach to Panamint Valley. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the six mile Slate Range Crossing was inherited from Panamint City days.

OFFICIALDOM AND CHARACTERS

The Judicial District, of which Ballarat Precinct was a part, was far flung. It included Darwin, Modock, Camp Lyon, Mountain Springs and Arondo on the west side of Panamint Valley in the Argus Range, plus all the camps in the Panamints.

Prior to Ballarat, Darwin was the seat of justice. Charles Anthony had been Justice of the Peace there. Anthony was a substantial business man of Darwin with varied interests, including mining.

Anthony's Camp and custom mill in Pleasant Canyon was a forerunner of the Ratcliff Mine. In fact, Henry Ratcliff had worked at Anthony's Camp, prior to making his big discovery.

Judge Richard Decker, who served as Justice of the Peace in Ballarat from 1897, was murdered in 1905 by his Constable Henry Pietsch. Following this tragedy, Darwin made a request of the Board of Supervisors for a Justice of its own. The board compromised by deciding to have two judges and courts for the district. Edgar M. Wardwell was appointed to the Darwin court and J. H. Gorsline for Ballarat. The later remained in office until 1909.

J. E. Curran succeeded him and remained until the court was abolished in 1918. J. W. Trotter, Ballarat's first elected constable in 1898, was succeeded by W. G. Morton, who was followed by George L. Halter and later by Henry Piesch. Chris Wicht was constable in 1910.

Law enforcement in Ballarat was notable for its laxity, especially with regard to liquor licenses in the pre-Volstead years.

Registered voter strength of Ballarat was always light, but considering that it was pre-sufferage, each vote had weight. A maximum registration of 99 votes in Ballarat Precinct is noted for 1900. A maximum for all the princincts comprising the Judicial District was approximately 200.

Inyo County officials always viewed Ballarat's isolation with consideration. For this, their constituency in Panamint Valley was loyal to the last vote.

Our heritage of memories concerning Ballarat is not for its economic accomplishments. Rather, it is for the desert folklore it generated; for its colorful characters and for the apt manner in which it supplied recreation to its rugged customers.

In addition to these much publicized characters, Pete Augueberry, Shorty Harris, Jean LeMoigne and Charles (Seldom Seen Slim) Ferge, here are other candidates for our Ballarat Hall of Fame:

Fred Gray, assayer and mine broker who came to Ballarat in 1897, spent most of half a century there. He lingered on as the unofficial "Mayor of Ballarat" until he died in 1947.

Chris Wicht "lingered on" too. He came in 1899 and died in 1944, spending most of 45 years in Ballarat. He owned the town's most popular saloon. It had the only pool table which he had brought down from Panamint City.

Harry Porter came to Ballarat from Anvil Springs in Butte Valley in 1900. He is well remembered for having ferreted out a highgrade "picture-rock" deposit at the head of Happy Canyon. It was quartz, heavy with wire-gold and believed by many to have been the lost Breyfogle. It was inaccessible except by burros and by Harry. He never sold it; taking out only what gold he needed to keep himself and burros alive. The name of the claim was Mountain Girl. Harry died at 86 years in 1949 and is buried at Bishop.

Bessie Hart, an Amazon type woman, homely but kindly, operated a small mill and mine above the Ratcliff in Pleasant Canyon. Rupert Greene remembers her as always ready to lend a hand with the sick when needed.

There was Indian Joe who supplied Ballarat and the John Searles operation on Borax Lake just south of the Slate Range with fresh vegetables and fruit from his place on Peterson Creek in the Argus Mountains. He would cart his produce down to the Tanks where it would be picked up by the Ballarat Stage.

It was in the Panamints near Ballarat that Clifford Burton, a young Canadian, made his first gold find. It was a few pockets of extremely high grade ore, so inaccessible that he was forced to carry the rich ore down the mountain in his loose cover-alls, secured with twine at wrists and ankles. Clifford and his brother Cecil later became famous as operators of the Tropico Mine and Mill at Rosamond.

Practically every mining man of the period knew Ballarat and frequented it.

Ballarat's decline began with the closing of the Ratcliff operations in Pleasant Canyon. The epidemic of mining booms in Tonopah, Goldfield, Bullfrog, Rhyolite and Greenwater, plus the strikes at Harrisburg and Skidoo, all were lures for Ballarat's miners and its storekeepers.

The official knell was the closing of the Post Office in 1917 and the Justice Court in 1918. One by one the adobe houses were deserted. The elements, aided by vandals, soon brought Ballarat to its present Ghost Town status.

Through World Wars I and II, there were fitful revivals of mining in the Panamints. Its canyons are still inviting. The idle Ratcliff property was acquired in 1912 by W. D. Clair. It has been maintained through the years by the Clair family and is now known as Clair Camp. Mr. and Mrs. Vere Clair, son and daughter-in-law of W. D. Clair, reside there. Much of the data of this review has been gleaned from the Clair family.

The townsite of Ballarat consists of 80 acres, 40 of which had been divided into town lots. Laura May Wagner, of San Leandro, now holds title. She has been most cooperative in this Historical Landmark project.

All Inyo County offices and the Eastern California Museum Association, including its Museum Historian Dorothy Cragen, have welcomed and aided our research. The author is grateful to them all and also to fellow researchers Doris Bray, George and Ann Pipkin of Trona.